**Discourses we live by: truth, and nothing but the truth, and negative capability**

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***Introduction: fundamentalism is ordinary***

The notion that ‘we’, as individuals, whole groups or cultures, possess the truth and nothing but the truth might well be a universal discursive tendency, colonising diverse minds and hearts, across different times and places. The truth and nothing but the truth of politics, religion, economics, of myths and or of diverse ideologies: here lies the province of the fundamentalist too, or maybe a fundamentalist lurking in all our psychologies, which, I argue, is really quite an ordinary phenomenon.

The word fundamentalism was coined in California and its origins lie in Protestant movements in nineteenth century America. These movements consisted of people who wanted to assert the inerrancy of the Bible – the direct creation of the world and humanity *ex nihilo* by God as opposed to Darwinian evolution – and the authenticity of miracles and the Virgin birth. But fundamentalism and related discourses of absolute truth encompass very different phenomena (Ruthven, 2007). Following Wittgenstein, the word, heuristically, might also be helpful in a search for similarities across different forms. Of course, not every person we call a fundamentalist reaches for a Kalashnikov or pipe bomb. But, broadly speaking, fundamentalism can be thought of as a defensive retreat from engagement with others and otherness, rooted, perhaps, in feelings of disrespect, marginalization and or psychological or even cultural vulnerability. It works at the level of discourse or metanarrative, in which the other is to blame or there is simply no alternative available, as in the kind of market fundamentalism pervading the contemporary world. In the case of racism and Islamism people can turn to those who think like themselves and hostility develops towards the different other, or ideas and experience that challenge their view of the world. Fundamentalism among some men might represent a reaction to the terror of seeming feminine and unmanly – as in extreme fascistic organizations, for instance (Flemmen, 2014).

The dynamics of fundamentalism can encompass processes we might also recognize in ourselves, at least at times: when stress and uncertainty are overwhelming, when we feel out of our depth and can’t cope, and may grab at facts or certainties to help manage anxiety. Traits such as dogmatism, rigidity and a need for order and power, might underpin a wide psycho–political spectrum of people and groups. The need for external sources of absolute authority or truth, or for discourses of complete certainty – for the mythical texts of Communism, Islamism or Catholicism are a kind of defence against not knowing as well as representing a widespread human phenomenon. So too is the tendency, individually and collectively, to split off parts of ourselves that we fear or don’t like, such as the capacity for violence or greed, and to project these on to others.

We could factor ‘market fundamentalism’ into our wordplay, with its dogmatism, its tendency towards absolute truths and the disparagement of the poor as deviant and wholly responsible for their own condition. According to academic and psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe (2014), in this form of thinking anyone who does not succeed must have something wrong with them. The pressure to achieve and be happy results in a warped view of the self, disorientation and despair. People are lonelier than ever before, he argues. Today's pay-for-performance mentality is turning institutions such as schools, universities and hospitals into businesses – even individuals are being made to think of themselves as one-person enterprises. Love or deeper forms of relationship can be increasingly hard to find, and we might struggle to lead meaningful lives when we are colonised by the performative imperative. Verhaeghe's main concern is how social change has led to what he calls a psychic crisis and altered the way we think about ourselves. He has investigated the effects of 30 years of neo-liberal fundamentalism involving free-market forces and privatization, and the relationship between our engineered society and individual identity. He finds out that who we are is, as always, determined by the context in which we live. From his clinical experience as a psychoanalyst Verhaeghe suggests the profound impact that social change may be having on mental health, including the nature of the disorders from which we suffer, like excessive narcissism. Here ‘dependence is spineless’ and we must make our mark, stand up for ourselves and do our own thing (p. 13). Such individualism and the disintegration of collective notions of well-being can bring a terrible price in suffering and distress. So too might the tendency to blame the poor for their condition and the negative stereotyping of whole communities (West, 2016a).

I suggest one important antidote to fundamentalist tendencies, of whatever kind, is what the English poet John Keats called negative capability. This is the capacity to live in doubt and not knowing, as part of a process of coming to know and to be open to what may be more truthful, worthwhile and even beautiful. Such capability, I suggest, is grounded in the quality of our relationships, which encompasses educational settings as well as families, communities and those closest to us. I now explore one manifestation of such negative capability in a form of liberal workers’ education that emerged in the United Kingdom at the end of the nineteenth century. But I also suggest that we might have need of our fundamentalisms, at times in our biographical journeys, as a means to escape restrictive and stifling cultures of conformity. But we should continue to regard this as but a stage in the struggle for more open, reflexive and even beautiful ways of knowing.

***Distress in a city***

My central argument is the outcome of historical reappraisal and in-depth, auto/biographical narrative research into racism and fundamentalism in a post-industrial city, Stoke-on-Trent, in the English Midlands, where I was born and raised (West, 2016a). The research included in-depth narrative interviews with autodidacts, schooled in workers’ education and the wider Labour movement. I revisited the history of workers’ education, including my own work (West, 1972), in the light of the City’s post-industrial distress, encompassing racism on the public housing estate where I lived. The process was stimulated by Jonathan Rose’s reassessment of workers’ education (Rose, 2010) and its place in the development of British social democracy, alongside the insights of the historian Lawrence Goldman (1995; 2013). Rose drew on diverse personal testimonies and forms of life writing in his re-evaluation of the Workers’ Educational Association (WEA) while Goldman interrogated the historical interpretation of historians like Roger Fieldhouse and Stuart Macintyre. I was once modishly dismissive of particular forms of workers’ education. But then I was a child of the 1960s where space opened for critical thinking alongside new forms of fundamentalism, hubris and dismissiveness towards previous generations. This is a central theme of my recent book (West, 2016a).

The basic contention of the paper is that we are all be prone, at times, to cling to what we conceive to be the truth and nothing but that truth, which can be illuminated through auto/biographical and historical enquiry. In the history of workers’ education, for instance, in the United Kingdom, particular autodidacts could be dogmatic, rooted in religion or hard, structuralist readings of Marxism. Their questioning was paradoxical: challenging conventional wisdoms but inflexible in their response to others. They might quote texts with quasi-religious fervour in workers’ classes. Their Marxism could involve an extremely mechanical version of the materialist conception of history, in which human activity was controlled by economic forces independent of human volition (Macintyre, 1980).

Workers’ education in the UK was characterised by a mix of Enlightenment idealism, the aspirations of democratic socialism, as well as Marxism, and for many, a religious belief in the potential divinity in everyone. It was a social as much as an educational movement. Jonathan Rose (2010) argues that it played a key role in creating the welfare state after the Second World War. Workers’ education could model, in microcosm, the good, fraternal and equal democratic society. These adult classes represented a social and educational experiment open to the marginalized, with an equality of status between students that encouraged freedom of expression and enquiry, tolerance and respect, alongside the turbulence generated in the clash of ideas and difference. But difference and dispute did not, in general, degenerate into I-it objectification, at least in any permanent way. At their best the classes were communities of imaginative, caring, committed and thoughtful students, in which all could be teachers as well as learners.

Workers education, in the form of tutorial classes, once thrived in Stoke. The first ever university workers’ tutorial class took place there in 1908 when 30 or so worker students met on Friday evenings for 2 hours, over a period of years, with their tutor, R.H. Tawney, a subsequently distinguished economic historian, representing the University of Oxford. The tutorial classes constituted an unusual alliance, in European popular education, between progressive elements in universities and workers’ organisations. The classes were free from prescribed curricula and its members were encouraged to explore issues in their working lives from the perspectives of history, politics, economics and literature. Fortnightly essays were required, and the standard of some of these was high (West, 1972; Goldman, 1995). There were no formal examinations or qualifications due to a desire to eliminate competition and vocationalism from the classroom (West, 1972; Rose, 2010).

The first students met in the pottery town of Longton that was soon to become part of a new city of Stoke-on-Trent. They were potters, miners, clerks, shop assistants and elementary school teachers, women as well as men (West, 1972). Many came from non-conformist backgrounds, from families, in short, that encouraged them to think for themselves. The Marxist Social Democratic Federation made up the nucleus of the first class. The Social Democratic Federation was formed in 1883 under the leadership of Henry Hyndman who was the son of a business man and became a journalist and political agitator (Macintyre, 1980). The Federation was strongly opposed to the British Liberal Party of the time, and its programme was progressive, calling for a 48-hour working week, the abolition of child labour, compulsory free secular education, equality for women and the nationalization of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Some members of the SDF, according to Stuart Macintyre, held, to repeat, an extremely ‘mechanical version of the materialist conception of history’ in which the whole of human experience was controlled by economic forces independent of human agency (Macintyre, 1980: 17). Education, politics and consciousness were mere epiphenomena of the techniques and relations of production. Such students could be rigid in their economic doctrines (ibid), and the rigidity played out in the tutorial classes.

However, Tawney thought the tutorial class ‘movement’ and the WEA a successful ‘experiment in democratic education’. According to him, it was founded on three core principles. First, the opposition to revolutionary violence: ‘one may not do evil that good should come’, in Cobbett’s dictum of a century before. Second, no institution, however perfect in conception, could be made to work effectively by individuals whose morality was inadequate. Third, where a sound morality was lacking, this could be forged in a community of scholars seeking truth and the common good (Dennis and Halsey, 1988). There was an Aristotelian ideal at work here, as well as Oxford idealism (Goldman, 1995), notions of the fully developed person living in communities, building and sustaining virtue in relationship – communities cultivating not self- but other-regardedness, directing themselves to higher aims than the purely egotistic or narcissistic (Dennis and Halsey, 1988). The idealists at Oxford who influenced Tawney were opposed to individualism, utilitarianism and social atomism and drew on German philosophers, especially Kant and Hegel, and the notion that individuals are best understood and realize their potential in the collective. Men and women were part of webs of social and political as well as economic relationships from which they could not be divorced for analytic or practical purposes. They were linked together by values, institutions and diverse patterns of association rather than, simply, economics.

Tawney himself had doubts about the tutorial classes, not least the intellectual and emotional effort required from the worker students. Tawney was also far from a naïve idealist and there were ‘limits to his moralising’, as Lawrence Goldman notes (Goldman, 1995: 160). He was aware that the same spirit of non-conformity that drove some of the worker students could also narrow viewpoints and bring the tendency to over-proselytize, making it difficult to dialogue and be respectful to difference.

***Breakdown, and taking tea***

It is interesting that many of the worker students admired tutors like Tawney who remained steadfast as well as respectful even when harangued by a fundamentalist student. Leftist fundamentalists, sometimes from the Social Democratic Federation and later the Communist Party, though not exclusively so, might quote from texts like *Das Capital* with religious fervour. The other students noted how Tawney remained steadfast in the face of provocation. One recalled a particular Marxist – the SDF could dominate the first tutorial classes – challenging point after point and referring to classic Marxist texts. Tawney took it in his stride but insisted that there were other points of view. The student accused the tutor of hopping around like a bird, from twig to twig, and a sense of bad temper pervaded the room. However, Tawney insisted that everyone, including his challenger, take tea together afterwards and tell stories, read poetry and sing songs. A shared humanity and a spirit of fraternity were restored (Rose, 2010: 266). The class stayed together despite the local secretary of the SDF demanding that his members leave for fear of contamination (Goldman, 2013).

John Holford (Holford, 2015) usefully reminds us that these were classes, not lectures, and ideas were explored and developed in discussion. The processes of education were democratised – students engaged in research and discovery through using original source material, like historical documents, rather than simply relying on secondary texts. The fundamental aim of the tutorial classes was to make university education available to all people in their localities, in pedagogically democratic and dialogical ways. Humanity, risk taking, and engagement with otherness, and the challenge to fundamentalism this can represent, constituted a cultural as well as group challenge to the psychological seductions of omniscience.

***The seductions of fundamentalism***

I am also suggesting that a long, never complete struggle is to be fought against fundamentalism, in ourselves as well as others. Psychoanalyst Adam Phillips (2012) has considered the relationship between the internal world and the appeal of fundamentalism. Drawing on clinical work, over many years, he discusses the problems of ‘not getting it’ in intimate or wider social life. Not getting it, feeling confused, misunderstood or inadequate can have devastating effects in early life. We don false mantles in the hope of gaining the other’s attention and regard. Getting it – feeling understood by a powerful other – means potentially not feeling humiliated or diminished. Not getting it, however – not understanding what is going on and feeling lost and frantic, like the child who struggles to understand a mother’s depression – is a widespread human experience. What we may then long for is a gang and a mythic narrative of our own. A dream of like-mindedness is the dream in which the possibility of not getting it disappears. We can be attracted to groups of the like-minded because the issue of not getting it is resolved in the abolition of complexity. The defence against not getting it, or not knowing, evokes the seduction of certainty. Hannah Arendt (1958) observed how opinion can solidify into ideology and fundamentalism, which demand assent and certainty.

The process involves creating rigid boundaries between us and them, and between our self of present understanding and a potential self of a different way of seeing. Fundamentalist groups offer compelling ‘truths’ of how the other is to blame – whether in the moral corruption of the West or the greedy Jew – and how ‘our’ group is good. The trouble is that this involves the projection on to the other of aspects we most dislike in ourselves. No hard work is required in this anti-education, because the fault lies elsewhere. The turn to fundamentalism, old and new, brings for its disciples the feeling of getting it, of belonging, of recognition in a grand but finally delusional way. We are made to feel part of something essential to creating a purified world. Education, however, as in the workers’ tutorial classes, gives us choice – to decide or not whether we love the world enough to wish to seek to understand and take responsibility for it as well as to engage with the other in humane and open ways (Nixon, 2015).

So, I suggest there are psychosocial patterns across fundamentalism, in its many guises. Wittgenstein thought it important to play with similarities in the use of a word: a word like games, for instance, in its various guises. Ball games, word games, Olympic Games are all different but there can be family resemblances (Ruthven, 2007). There may be resemblances between market and Islamic fundamentalism or between the zealot in a tutorial class or, even occasionally, how we have behaved. Islamic fundamentalism may, like forms of leftist ideology, exploit the power of trauma and myth in processes of radicalization. If Islam is full of narratives of mercy and tolerance, as Christianity and socialism are, there is a darker side too (Hassan and Weiss, 2015). The dark side is revealed in the worship of violence; the degeneration of the ideals of the French Revolution into slaughter and the grotesque narcissism of small difference that continue to haunt the progressive imagination.

Market fundamentalism might appear quite different with regards to violence. But it too employs powerful mythology, grounded in social Darwinism and the cult of success, in ways that have penetrated to the heart of modern Western societies. The market is sovereign and can provide for all human needs: consumption is crucial, as is the consumer (rather than the citizen). It works through appealing, via instruments of persuasion, to a desire for status, triumph, power and performance (Verhaeghe, 2014). It may also, in its manipulation of images, employ violence in video games or social media to sell products, using heroes, myths and triumphal sexual conquest to make its pitch. Thus Mirowski (2013), drawing on Hayek’s free market ideas, argues that neo-liberalism is profoundly anti-educational in its assumptions and practices: encouraging the prioritization of the market and consumption as the only good. Too much education of a questioning kind is antithetical to the efficient functioning of markets and the cultivation of desire, discontent and materialistic illusions on which conspicuous consumption depends.

I also suggest that the importance for human flourishing of the diverse social group mirrors the psychoanalytic stress on the cosmopolitan, democratic psyche or Biesta’s normative subjectification (Biesta, 2011). Andrew Samuels (1993) has written that the cultural diversity of the population is not a disaster, but a challenge and opportunity for healthy internal life. How to remain open to others and acknowledge and learn from difference, rather than seeing it as a threat, becomes the central issue for us all. The metaphor of psyche as theatre helps to comprehend this idea: internal worlds are constituted and peopled by varied ‘objects’ drawn from intersubjective relationships – objects that encourage or constrain, or enable us to take risks with the unknown and the other.

But there may be a more positive and development dimension to our relationship with fundamentalism. One insight into fundamentalism’s potential developmental role in our biographies emerged in a discussion on the social unconscious at the ESREA Triennial Conference last year (Salling Oleson et al, 2017). Lynn Froggett, in response to my own paper, described how she embraced the Socialist Workers Party, at one stage in her life, as a kind of antidote to the stifling narrowness of a provincial background. She could use its discursive forms, however ‘fundamentalist’ these might have been, as a good enough object, in psychoanalytic terms, to break free and play with new stories. We might therefore need a more sympathetic educational reading of fundamentalist tendencies, one that is biographically developmental. The capacity for negative capability might, in such terms, be a lifelong struggle with the capacity to be seduced and even with feelings of liberation.

***Conclusion, negative capability***

Notwithstanding the above, being colonised by the truth and nothing that truth denotes the opposite of certainty or epistemological substance– it represents a fragile and uncertain subjectivity in need of externally derived authority, whether from Marxism, religion or whatever source. But ‘liberal’ workers’ education provided a cultural and educational space to engage with fundamentalisms in various guises, including racism and bigotry, and to move towards greater openness to the other and otherness (see Nancy Dobrin, 1990, for instance, for one compelling account). Here was a cultural space of sufficient equality, respectfulness (including towards the bigot), dialogue and truth seeking. At best the process generated what critical theorist Axel Honneth (2007; 2009) terms self-recognition, enhancing the capacity to recognise a different other. Through life writing and auto/biographical narrative research, we bear witness to how educators like Tawney and the worker-students often created good enough space to question and transcend taken for granted discourses, and engage with the symbolic world and its otherness in emotionally, intellectually and discursively liberated ways.

How best to think then about negative capability? Stephen Hebron (2009, 2017) writes of how, in December, 1817, the poet and Romantic Keats was returning from a Christmas pantomime and got into a discussion on various subjects: several thoughts dovetailed in his mind, Keats said, and he wondered about the qualities that went to form achievement especially in literature. Shakespeare possessed this quality enormously, he thought. Keats concluded that negative capability was the quality: when a person can stay in uncertainties, or mysteries and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. The language may not be immediately clear, but is more suggestive and idiosyncratic. Obviously, the word ‘negative’ is not being used pejoratively but rather to communicate a notion that a person’s potential can be defined by what he or she does not possess. Essential to literary achievement, Keats argues, is a certain passivity, a willingness to let what is mysterious or doubtful remain just that. It might in short be best to break off from a relentless search for knowledge, and instead contemplate something beautiful and true, in the Romantic spirit; ‘a fine verisimilitude’. The experience and intuitive appreciation of the beautiful, or of the potential beauty of a different idea or way of seeing, might be central to poetic talent, but also to democratic educational sensibilities (Hebron, 2009; 2017).

Moreover, this idea finds traction in psychoanalytic thinking about struggles for profounder forms of change. Any new idea presents itself as an emotional experience, which can be both beautiful but also deeply threatening. Pleasure and pain – of losing cognitive certainty – may co-exist (Meltzer and Harris Williams, 1988). In the workers’ tutorial classes, as well as in other creative struggles, whether in literature or therapeutic settings, negative capability might just thrive, sufficiently, so as to enable a person to live in doubt, and then to experience, over time, a fundamental change to a way of seeing, despite how unsettling the process is. The culture of the group matters in such a process: a spirit of fraternity and the capacity of a teacher to live in uncertainty, for a while matter greatly. Such cultures were at the heart of Tawney’s successful experiment in democratic education.

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